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ABSTRACT

One of the deepest and most debilitating schisms in the university classroom, as in life, is that between the left and right sides of the brain, reason and emotion, the head and the heart. More and more college English teachers have become aware of the value of addressing the whole brain, the whole person. Teachers set up goals and communicate expectations either directly or deceptively and students base their judgments not just on the words addressed to the left half of their brains, but also on their right-brain memories of the lived experience and emotional impact of their teachers' or parents' behavior. Reading journals' assignments and the creation of a student-centered classroom can encourage communication between both sides of the brain. Personal experience essays are examples of some of the best student writing, but some students are not comfortable with baring their souls. These students should be encouraged to focus on intellectual rather than emotional honesty--instructors are urged to applaud both kinds of writing. (CR)

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The Teacher as Model

One of the deepest and most debilitating schisms in the university classroom, as in life, is that between the left and the right sides of the brain, reason and emotion, the head and the heart. More and more college English teachers have become aware of the value of addressing the whole brain, the whole person.[1] However, a rarely discussed obstacle is identified on the first page of the CCCC Call for Program Proposals for 1996: "we at times create boundaries that we expect others to transcend, but perhaps it is we who must transcend them." Yet most of us have had no training in transcending the boundaries I have identified.

One of the greatest ironies of graduate school for me is that I was never once required or even encouraged to take any courses in teaching. Because my financial aid was primarily in the form of fellowhsips rather than teaching positions, I did not even acquire any significant experience.[2]

I have often wondered lately, if I had taken some courses in educational pyschology what would I have learned? *The Authentic Teacher*, by Clark Moustakas, was published in 1966, the year after I began graduate school. I now know that what he said about "children" applies to college students as well. Had encountered this book in graduate school I would have been reminded that "teachers set up goals and communicate expectations, either directly or deceptively, so that what they really want and expect from the child registers at subliminal levels regardless of what they say" (p. 5). As a parent I eventually learned the importance of this "experiential learning": children following the example rather than the advice of their parents, basing their judgments not just on the words addressed to the left half of their brains but also on their right-brain memories of the full, lived experience and especially the emotional impact of their parents' behavior. When they move from the family to the school, students retain their ability to detect hypocrisy, the discrepancy between *what* we teach and *how* we teach. A professor lecturing to a class, for example, about collaborative learning with little no true interaction with them, is communicating a hierarchical, individualistic approach to knowledge no matter what he or she may be saying about its social construction. Students soon learn, regardless of any ostensibly liberating goals of a course, that the class itself is the text and they must follow the

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rules inscribed in it. I wish I had been tuned into this fact when I was in graduate school.

Had I read Moustakas then I would have learned that "Prescott has emphasized that a primary condition to the establishment of an effective interpersonal relationship with a child is the recognition by the teacher of feelings and attitudes peculiar to him and influenced by the special conditions of his life. Unfortunately, not all teachers are aware of the significant influence they have on the children in their classrooms. All children respond to the teacher as a person. The teacher's attitudes toward them, though perhaps only subtly expressed, are conveyed to children and influence their behavior. This influence can be very penetrating and pervasive, and may materially affect the child's behavior ..... Children tend to remember vividly the teacher's emotional responses, the teacher himself, long after they have forgotten the school skills and lessons "(37-8, 40).

What emotional responses? While the emotional power of literature is what first attracted me, I learned especially as a graduate student to repress emotion and apply some theory or other to the text. That certainly was the example set by my teachers at Berkeley and my undergraduate institutions: the University of Minnesota and Amherst College. So I would have been shocked to discover that, as Moustakas put it, that "We sometimes think that if we suppress anger or fear, if we shut it out, deny it, or change the subject, its influence on the child will be minimized. More often than not, when we respond to children in this way, the feelings remain, become intensified, and more strongly influence the child's behavior." (44). [3]

If I am not to suppress my emotions what am I to do? Moustakas cites Carl Rogers: "It is important that the teacher be a real person -- enthusiastic, sad, angry, joyful, calm, excited, stand out in an honest way with the range of feelings that differentiate the living person from the mechanical role player" (260).

Many teachers hearing this now will think that it's too late, and I would tend to agree. I discovered that the most difficiult client for therapists helping people attain such goals is the intellectual. A college professor is just about hopeless. It seemed the more education I received the more thorough was my lobotomy, cutting the left side of my brain off from the right, splitting reason from emotion, language from feeling, my head from my heart. Nine years of college and fifteen years of ostensibly objective "research" in an institution that the student newspaper once labeled "the church of reason" had anesthetized me and endowed me with an amazing ability to spin complex webs of words to defend myself from emotion

Yet I would agree with Moustakas' conclusion: "No matter how entrenched a teacher is in the world of the other, in rationalizing, in analyzing, in intellectualizing, no matter how immersed in standards and values and goals of the

system, he still can, in the next moment, decide to alter the course of his existence. He still can become the one he really is, creating meanings and values and actualizing potentialities that are consistent with his real self" (260).

Unfortunately, I did not read Moustakas or anybody like him in graduate school. Twenty years later it took a family tragedy finally to get me started down this path. When I first began to encourage communication between both sides of the brain I assigned reading journals and adopted the student centered classroom. Eventually I shifted the student journal more and more in the direction of autobiography. Although I did not know it at the time, I was contributing to a long-standing tradition in the teaching of writing. I remembered that the best course I had ever taken in college, freshman English at Amherst College, was devoted solely to self-exploration -- there were no books at all. Twenty years later, forty-eight nationally famous writing teachers were asked to contribute an example of the best student writing and explain its excellence. The result? "At least thirty of the examples in the collection are personal experience essays -- twenty of them autobiographical narratives -- and several of the remaining eighteen include writing about the writer" (Coles; Faigley 120). In my courses, journals, brief writing exercises, and computer-assisted writing began to culminate in essay-length writing and finally in embryonic autobiographies.

However, such a classroom can be the scene of intense emotions and strong pressure to conform. For example, early in the semester in my upper-division autobiography class, I asked the students to compile a list of their motivations for writing their lifestories.[4] To begin the process of communicating their lifestories to others, I asked students to choose one or two motivations from their list they felt comfortable sharing in class. Many of the students stressed the cathartic or therapeutic value of writing about traumatic events in their lives. When we were done sharing, I was asked what brought me to this kind of writing. Now, when asked such a question, I believe it is imperative to be honest, so I stated that a primary motivation for me too was the cathartic value of writing about traumatic events in my life.

Then I was faced with the dilemma I wish to discuss today. Some of the students had entirely different kinds of motivations, ranging from writing humorous stories about their past to remembering happy times in childhood. I knew from experience that they might feel pressured to subordinate these goals and write "catharsis" lifestories themselves. Could I protect them from such pressure?

Anticipating this problem, I had included in the anthology I had created for them "A Note on 'Catharsis Papers'" by John Trimble, one of the master teachers in my department. In his advanced writing course students "see more and more classmates writing occasionally soul-baring pieces, and they naturally feel pressure

to write something revealing themselves.... Secretly, perhaps even unconsciously, they yearn to be known, yearn to unload, for they too carry their hurts, their embarrassments, their guilts, and they too long for community. Yet they're terrified of self-disclosure. They've never really opened up before, least of all to classmates. So they get increasingly defensive-- upset at themselves, upset at their classmates, upset at me." To deal with this situation, Prof. Trimble emphasizes that a student can do just fine in his course "without revealing a single secret about himself." Everyone is expected to write "*honestly*," that is, "be true to what we think and feel about our chosen subject," but the fearful student is advised "to avoid topics that might take you beyond your comfort zone. At the very least, remove any details that might invite unwanted curiosity."

To be honest himself, Prof. Trimble goes on to say, "While I sympathize with classmates who fear opening up, and while I'll defend most vigorously their right o keep their private life private, I make no bones about hoping to encourage greater openness in all of us, myself included. I see no reason why a psychiatrist's office should be the only place where people can be real with one another. ... Some famous author once remarked, 'The function for writing is to make private problems public'. Well, that's hardly the sole function, but it's surely one. The point of that remark, as I understand it, is that whenever a person openly confronts his or her private demons, it's that much easier for the rest of us to confront and neutralize our own. Meanwhile, of course, it's equally therapeutic for the individualas well."

Having admitted this, Prof. Trimble returns to the case of the fearful student and emphasizes that the student can focus on intellectual rather than emotional honesty: "unloadingone's convictions can involve just as much courage as sharing the most intimate experiences or emotions.... Let's agree, then, that classmates who take intellectual risks -- who really put their opinions on the line -- maybe e doing something every bit as courageous as those classmates who bare their hearts and lives before us. Let's applaud *both* kinds of writing."

So we can agree and even applaud, but our own examples as teachers obviously continues to communicateour orientation to catharsis writing. Hence, we can still wonder, will not students write the way the teacher does just to please him or her and thereby (in their past experience) get a better grade? Even if they can dispense with this old behavior will they not succumb to peer pressure? How to preserve the necessary boundaries in such a classroom between teacher and student, student and student?

I am trying to avoid the situations where there are either too rigid boundaries or no boundaries at all. In other words, the goal for me is permeable boundaries. To be more specific, I want to challenge the teacher-centered classroom even on the unconscious level, where the teacher unconsciously still controls the student's

response, still lives the student's life for him or her, by the power of his or her own example. I want the student to be truly free, as much as possible in the institutional setting, to discover who he or she is and, in an autobiography class, write the story of his or her own life, not somebody else's, and not regurgitate the master narrative of the culture either if possible.